



WILD Kids



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In 1985, Arizona Game & Fish Department decided to celebrate Arizona Wildlife Month by having students elect our state fish, state reptile, state mammal, and state amphibian. There were four candidate species for each category of Arizona's official state wildlife. In the category state mammal, the candidates were bighorn sheep, ringtail, javelina and Coues' white-tailed deer. The winner was the ringtail. In the category state amphibian, the candidates were the Colorado river toad, the red spotted toad, the desert spadefoot and the Arizona tree frog. The winner was the Arizona tree frog. Descriptions of each candidate were circulated through the public school system and students were asked to choose the one animal they would like to see as the state wildlife species in each category. The results were then presented to the State Legislature for official approval.

ACTIVITY: Below are brief descriptions of the four candidates for the categories of state fish and state reptile. Separate your class into 8 groups, hopefully with no more than 5 people per group. Assign a candidate to each group. Since this is an election year, make-up an election strategy for your candidate to get elected. Make posters telling the good points about your candidate, their home region, a picture or two, etc. Then come up with a packet of information that you can distribute to your classmates. In this packet include not only additional information, but fun things like puzzles, games, coloring pictures, mazes, etc. Next, have a debate where the candidates from each category answer questions from the audience. Finally, make ballots and have your election. Did your class elect the same winner as the official one? Have Fun!!

State Reptile Candidates

Gila Monster - Heloderma suspectum

Arizona's largest lizard, the Gila monster may reach 24 inches in length. In Greek, Heloderma means wart-skin, a reference to its beaded scales. Suspectum is Latin for distrusted.

Gila monsters are irregularly patterned in black and buff, orange or pink. The back and head are covered with round scales, giving the appearance and feel of beadwork. The blunt, swollen tail is a fat storage system.

The Gila monster occurs from southwestern Utah and north-eastern Nevada through Arizona into northern Sonora, Mexico. They are often associated with permanent and intermittent streams through desert scrub and grasslands, extending barely into oak woodlands in Arizona. They utilize rodent or tortoise burrows or dig their own, often living in holes in rocky washes.

The Gila monster is the only venomous lizard native to the United States. Since Gila monsters only bite when people attempt to pick them up, bites are rare. In addition to baby rodents and rabbits, Gila monsters also eat bird eggs, tortoise eggs and bird nestlings. Not much is known about the habits of the Gila monster because it spends from 90 to 95% of its time underground.

Desert Tortoise - Gopherus agassizii

The desert tortoise and its relative, the box turtle, are the only land turtles native to Arizona. Its scientific name is derived from a French word (gaufre) used to describe any burrowing animal and agassizii for Louis Agassiz, an early American herpetologist.

Adult males, which are larger than females, often obtain a body length of 10 to 14 inches and weigh as much as 8 pounds. The desert tortoise lives as long as 75 to 100 years in the wild. Tortoises are usually a faded dark brown color.

In Arizona, the desert tortoise is found up to elevations of 4500 feet from the northwestern corner of the state, southeasterly to Tucson and near Nogales and west into California. Its habitat is the saguaro and palo verde covered slopes of rocky foothills and low mountains. It is also found in desert areas with creosote, Joshua trees and other yuccas. Desert tortoises are almost entirely herbivorous, eating grasses, cacti, wildflowers, fruits and many green herbs.

Arizona Ridgenose Rattlesnake - Crotalus willardi

The Arizona ridgenose rattlesnake is one of eleven species of rattlesnakes that occur in Arizona, more than in any other state! Its scientific name comes from crotalum, the Greek word for rattle, and willardi, for Frank C. Willard, the Tombstone man who first found one in the wild.

The Arizona ridgenose rattlesnake is a small snake. Rarely does an adult weigh more than 4 ounces. Its turned-up nose scales give this species its common name. Its most characteristic markings are bold, white stripes on its brown face. The pattern is much like that of the war paint that the Chiricahua Apaches wore.

The range of the Arizona ridgenose rattlesnake covers only a few mountain ranges in south-central Arizona. Throughout its range, the ridgenose generally occurs at elevations of 5000 to 8000 feet in cool canyons with oak and pine trees. Arizona ridgenose rattlesnakes are quite secretive, being active mainly in the early morning or late afternoon. On a humid afternoon they can be found seeking the lizards, centipedes small snakes or small mice that are their main food.

Regal Horned Lizard - Phrynosoma solare

The four spines on the back of its head form a distinctive crown that touch at their bases, hence the common name, the regal horned lizard. The scientific name, Phrynosoma solare, means the "toad-body of the sun," a reference to its squatty shape and the desert region where it is found.

For a horned lizard, the regal is quite large, reaching a total length of about 7 inches. In color it may vary from light grey or tan to a reddish brown. The regal horned lizard is found in southern Arizona south into Northern Sinaloa, Mexico. It lives on rocky and gravelly areas in arid or semi-arid regions. In Arizona it is found in Sonora desertscrub among cacti, mesquite and creosote bush, extending into semidesert grassland in Cochise County.

Like most other horned lizards, the regal eats primarily ants, but does take other insects. They can often be found by walking around active ant hills in the mornings and late afternoons during the warm months of the year. Being very slow, horned lizards rely on concealing coloration for defense. When they sit motionless, they are very difficult to see. When molested they may inflate their lungs to appear larger and present their crown of horns in defense. Rarely, individuals will expel a fine stream of blood from their eyes when disturbed.

State Fish Candidates

Colorado Squawfish - Ptychocheilus lucius

The Colorado squawfish is the largest of the fish native to the Colorado River basin. Once common throughout the major rivers of Arizona, it is now Federally listed as endangered. It inhabited the deep, fast flowing, often muddy waters and large pools of these rivers.

The Colorado squawfish is a type of minnow, in fact the largest minnow in north America. It can grow to a length of 6 feet and weigh 80 pounds. Its scientific name Ptychocheilus means folded lips and lucius refers to its shining sides.

Before dams were built, squawfish moved upstream in "runs" before the spawning period. Unfortunately, dams were constructed and the squawfish was eliminated from much of its range in Arizona. Nevertheless, brood stocks are being maintained in fish hatcheries to use in a massive reintroduction program in hopes of recovering our native minnow.

Arizona Trout - Oncorhynchus apache

Historically, Arizona trout occupied headwaters of the Salt, San Francisco and Little Colorado Rivers. Currently there are natural populations still in five streams in the White Mountains. There are additional introduced populations in other streams in the White Mountains, Pinaleno Mountains and the Kaibab Plateau.

The Arizona trout's scientific name apache is so called for the Indian reservation where it was first identified. The Arizona trout has a yellowish background coloration with dark spots uniformly over its body. The back of the fish is golden to olive brown. The fins are white or yellow and there is a splash of orange to yellow on its lower jaw.

The Arizona trout is not a large fish, and thus well suited for life in small streams. They seem to prefer small-sized streams at high elevations. The fish rely primarily on pool development, undercut banks and overhanging riparian vegetation for cover. Feeding habits of the Arizona trout seem to vary according to size. Adults feed primarily on caddis flies. Land insects are also taken by all sizes of fish.

Bonytail Chub - Gila elegans

The bonytail chub is one of several fish native to the Colorado River basin now considered endangered by the Federal government. It once occurred in the mainstream Colorado River, as well as in the Salt and Gila Rivers. The chub thrived in warm, often muddy backwaters and eddies adjacent to swift water. Now it is known only from Lake Mohave, on the Colorado River. The Lake Mohave population consists of old adults, with no successful reproduction having been documented in the wild for more than 20 years.

The bonytail chub is large compared to most fish native to Arizona. It reaches lengths of almost 24 inches and weights of up to 2 pounds. The chub has a long, slender tail with a plump body and a slightly humped back. Adults eat filamentous algae, plant debris and plankton. Young chubs eat primarily aquatic insects.

Desert Pupfish - Cyprinodon macularius

The desert pupfish is one of two small native fish that occurred throughout the marshes, backwaters and springs of the desert rivers and streams of the Gila River basin and the Lower Colorado River. Usually, the water in which it thrived was shallow and often choked with aquatic vegetation. As these shallow waters disappeared from the landscape or had non-native, predatory fish introduced, the desert pupfish also disappeared. By 1970, it occurred in Arizonan in only a few places including Quitobaquito Pond in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

Although small in size, adults being less than one and one-half inches long, the desert pupfish is one of the more colorful and interesting fish native to Arizona. During spring and early summer breeding season, males become a beautiful iridescent blue, with yellow fins and dark bands on their tails. Desert pupfish are voracious eaters. Young pupfish begin feeding on aquatic vegetation soon after hatching.